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Q: What capabilities for offensive action against Israel did Saudi Arabia have in 1978? What capabilities will they have with the F-15 enhancement plus AWACS?

A: In 1978, the Saudis had the theoretical capability of striking Israeli targets or intercepting Israeli air patrols with Lightning fighter aircraft stationed at Tabuk, or with F-5 fighter aircraft which could be moved to Tabuk. The Lightnings are capable of carrying up to four general purpose bombs, while the F-5s can carry up to five general purpose bombs. In actuality, the primary role of the Lightning is air defense, and the F-5s are rarely deployed to Tabuk.

The F-15s sold to Saudi Arabia in 1978 to be delivered in the 1981-1984 time frame would provide the Saudis with an improved air defense capability over that provided by the Lightnings. However, changes in the threat highlighted the need to further improve the capabilities of these defensive aircraft needed to protect the vital oil facilities.

Provided the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) is sold the conformal fuel tanks and aerial tanker aircraft to refuel the F-15s in flight, the capability theoretically would exist to reach any target in Israel with a bomb load of five general purpose bombs. Given the intercept capabilities of the Israeli Air Force and Israeli surface-to-air missile and air defense artillery defenses, however, the probability of reaching Israeli targets would be extremely low, and potential RSAF F-15 losses would be high. Such an attack on Israel would also invite almost certain Israeli retaliation on critical Saudi facilities and installations, which would be highly vulnerable.

Some parts of the Saudi request pose greater threat to Israel than others. To what extent was this fact a part of your review of this issue? Could you review each item requested by the Saudis and evaluate its possible military impact on Israel?

RESPONSE: We looked carefully at the effect that the sale of this equipment would have on the military balance in the region in general, and upon the security of Israel in particular. We want to be absolutely assured of the continued adequacy of Israel's defenses, and we have carefully considered Israel's concerns about the sale of this equipment to Saudi Arabia. Of course, if viewed in isolation from our overall strategy for the region, the Saudi F-15 enhancement items and airborne surveillance aircraft do not benefit Israel. In fact, viewed narrowly, providing arms to Saudi Arabia increases Israel's perceived military threat.

Because of Israel's perception of an increased threat posed by the F-15 enhancement items, we took an especially hard look at this element of the regional balance. As a result of this assessment, we do not believe that the sale of this equipment to Saudi Arabia poses a real, major threat to Israel. In our view, Israel's well trained and highly effective air defense system, including sophisticated aircraft such as the F-15 and F-16, and point defensive missile and gun systems, provides a substantial deterrent to any potential Saudi attack, with or without the additional equipment for the F-15s. The Saudis also know that the Israeli Air Force could strike back into central Saudi Arabia with devastating effect. In other words, committment of Saudi forces against Israel would result in their almost inevitable loss, and would expose Saudi Arabia to attack from potential adversaries to the east and south.

The Saudis are well aware of this situation, and know that their forces simply cannot hope to succeed against the well equipped and highly trained Israelis, either unilaterally or in concert with other state in the region.

In sum, during our deliberations on this matter, we recognized that these systems, in the abstract, do provide Saudi Arabia with additional military capability. While obviously it is not possible to rule out absolutely the use of Saudi F-15s equipped with enhancement items against Israel, an objective analysis would rate both the likelihood of such use, and the probability of success in the unlikely event such use occurred, to be quite low.